

Academic Writing Experience of Iranian Postgraduate Students



Linguistics

Keywords: Academic writing, Teaching Writing, and EFL students.

Fatemeh Esmaeili

Islamic Azad University, Basmenj, Iran.

Kosar Esmaeili

Department of English, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University.

Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating the kind of writing instruction which Iranian postgraduate students have received in their writing courses. To achieve this goal, 30 postgraduate students were asked to participate in the study. The study applied quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The participants responded to a questionnaire and took part in an interview. Analysis of data indicates that participants received a surface level instruction with focus on grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, and paragraph level form. It is also found that university writing courses did not teach academic writing skills such as organization of research papers, synthesizing information from different reading sources, producing coherent texts. Students did not receive instruction on how to evaluate and synthesize the words and ideas of others in order to develop their own academic voices. It is suggested that university writing courses should familiarize students with rhetorical, organizational, and linguistic features of academic writing and focus on macro level features of academic writing as well as the paragraph-level and sentence-level aspects of expressing ideas in a foreign language.

Introduction

Until 1970s, teaching of second language writing focused on the features of L2 written text such as orthography, sentence-level structure, and discourse-level structures, and the way L2 student texts deviated from L1 norm (Kroll, 2003). The focus was on the end product of the writing rather than the process of composing a written task. The notion of writing as a process was introduced to L2 studies by Zamel (1976) who argued that advanced L2 writers were similar to L1 writers and benefit from instruction rather considering writing as a reproduction of previously learned syntactic or discourse structures. From process perspective writing is a complex, reiterative, and creative process. Learning to write requires the development of an efficient and effective composing process. The writer is engaged in the discovery and expression of meaning; the reader; interpreting the intended meaning (Schmitt, 2002). The process approach to writing was criticized for its theoretical and practical problems. The critics were mostly proponents of English for academic purposes. It was suggested that the emphasis in ESL composition instruction should be reader oriented rather than writer oriented. Research in writing English for academic purposes considered the issues of audience and genre. The audience research focused on the academic discourse community; in particular college and university professors.

In 1990s, research focused on the types of skills required for non native speaker students' effective functioning in academic studies. Within this, two major trends emerged: one is English for academic purposes which deals with academic preparation of students for studying in English speaking countries, and includes teaching of various academic skills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and note taking (Jorden, 1997, cited in Hinkel, 2002). The other one is English for specific purposes, which mainly focuses on writing skills in the disciplines such as natural sciences, engineering, and law (John, 1998 cited in Hinkel, 2002).

Students' academic writing is at the heart of teaching and learning in higher education. Students are assessed largely by what they write. In order to be successful in higher education, they are required to learn both general academic conventions as well as disciplinary writing requirements (Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, Swann, 2003). Teaching EFL learners how to write effectively is a fundamental need in the current educational system. Effective text production which meets the communication demands of the situation requires the use of composition strategies and processes that regulate written composition. (Castello, Banales, & Vega, 2010). Studies demonstrated that after having studied English as well as academic writing for years, students experience difficulty in their writing. For example Johns (1997 cited in Baleghizadeh & Gordani, 2012) found

that non-native graduate and undergraduate students lack skills required for recognizing appropriate use, the conventions and features of academic writing. There are various reasons for academic writing problems such as the ineffectiveness of writing courses and differences in approaches to teaching academic writing and assessing writing in different context; Leki and Carson (1997) suggested that "what is valued in writing for writing classes is different from what is valued in writing for other academic courses" (pp.64). In an earlier study of non-native speaking writing at the postgraduate level, Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz and Nunan (1998, cited in Buckingham, 2008) studied problems in organization on a macro-level of the thesis and on a micro-level of the paragraph, substantiation of arguments, strength of claims, as well as on the surface level of grammar and the mechanics of spelling, punctuation and bibliographic referencing.

According to (Coffin, et al 2003) students follow different purposes in their writing tasks, and their purposes are shaped by context of their learning. These purposes are:

Assessment, it is the main purpose for student writing. Students are required to produce essays, written examinations, or reports which are indication of their mastery of course content. In this approach their writing is evaluated both in terms of content and form.

Learning, the aim of this approach is to help students learn disciplinary knowledge as well as develop general abilities to reason and critique. Students are asked to write texts which show their reflections on the learning process itself.

Entering particular disciplinary communities, the communication norms are the primary means by which the members convey and evaluate the ideas. Students in higher levels of education are expected to learn the norms and conventions of their specific academic communities and produce texts that follow these conventions.

According to (Brown, 1995) postgraduate students should have a clear understanding of subject matter and be able to analyze and evaluate information for relevance, accuracy and authority. To develop writing students need to:

Become familiar with the discourse of their discipline. Different areas of study have different discourses; there are different types of writing and specific terminology in every discipline that students should learn to use.

Be responsible for audience. In order to write successfully, students need to understand audiences' expectations and prior knowledge because this affects the content of writing.

Students are required to write in several genres such as thesis, essay, report, case study. All of these academic writing tasks have some thing in common-there are there levels of structure:

1. Macro structure (type of text, and its subdivisions)
2. Middle level paragraph development
3. Micro-level sentence structure and style choices

Most of the EFL students find academic writing a challenging task, and lack the necessary skills to write according to the norms and conventions of specific academic community. John (1997) found that even advanced and highly trained NNS produce academic papers which are perceived to be vague. Izzo in his study from 1998-2002 found some of the most common sentence-level errors of Japanese university students' writing in English. The findings indicated that student's essays lack organization and contain features inappropriate for academic writing (cited in Newfields, 2003). Another study by Hirose (1998) showed that Japanese EFL students have difficulty in writing cohesive paragraphs because the focus of classrooms is mostly on sentence level translation and macro level instruction is ignored. Fujioka (2001) studied Asian EFL students' academic writing skills. Most respondents in her study indicated that their writing instruction had a strong grammar focus and concern with

paragraph-level form. Critical thinking skills were seldom taught. "The value of extensively reading academic papers was underscored by Fujioka. Extensive reading may enable respondents to gradually gain a sense of the features of academic writing. With this information in mind the present study aims to investigate the kind of instruction that Iranian EFL students receive in their writing course.

Method

Participants

For the purpose of the study thirty postgraduate students cooperated with the researchers. They were MA students or MA graduates of TOEFL and were within 25-32 age range. They had studied in different universities of and had 2-7 years experience of teaching TEFL.

Instrument

In this study, we used the questionnaire applied by Fujicco (2001). We made some changes considering the purpose of my study. It contained 25 Likert scale format questions which consisted of 5 statement, 1) always or almost always did, 2)often did, 3)sometimes did, 4)generally did not, 5) never or almost never did. Another instrument for gathering data was a semi-structured interview in which participants were asked some questions to account for their comments in the questionnaire.

Data analysis

The gathered data was analyzed through SPSS (version 17). The mean of answers was found for each question and one way-ANOVA was applied to them to account for the variance in results. Findings from interview were examined against the results of questionnaire.

Results & Discussion

According to the results of the study teachers assumed the first position in writing classes as the different phases of writing classes were conducted and managed by teachers. Students were required to read text books about writing skill and try to apply the skills to their own writing process. In different phases of writing students were given feedback about writing by teacher. Students also were provided with samples of writing of their classmates and were asked to pay attention to points that were problematic. The results show lack of collaboration between students in the process of writing; students were not provided with opportunity to work in groups, discuss writing activity and experience the kind of scaffolding which helped them in the process of writing. This is a drawback for today's instruction since Language learning is a social process which is concerned with developing communicative competence and as Vygotsky (1978) asserted learning is shaped and influenced by social interaction. Cooperative writing helps to develop and negotiate their ideas to carry out different tasks, in the processing of completing tasks they learn different strategies of negotiating, convincing and persuading others.

Table 1:

Instructional styles	Participants (N=30)	
	Mean	(S.D.)
1.teacher lectured	3.80	0.76
2.teacher showed examples of writing by student from class	3.06	0.82
3.teacher gave feedback to students writing	3.60	0.89
4. Students read text books about writing.	3.66	0.95
5. Students discussed writing.	2.20	0.96
6. Student participated in peer reviews.	1.90	0.71

1>2, 5, 6; 4>2, 5, 6; 3>2, 5, 6; (p<0.5)

Analysis of data revealed that the main focus of writing classes were grammar structures and correct spelling of words, topic sentences and supporting details of paragraphs and process of writing which also assumed main position in writing classes. However, macro structures of writing pointing to the overall structure and purpose of writing were neglected in writing classes, students were not instructed on how to organize their writing and achieve the purposes of task, they did not have any idea of their audience to whom they were writing. Quick reading of potential sources and reading critically in order to evaluate the text in terms of content organization; overall structure did not have any role in writing classes. Students were instructed through traditional approaches to writing which emphasized sentence level and paragraph level structure and did not consider macro structure of writing. They did not have any idea of the audience to whom they were writing. This kind of instruction can not accommodate current educational systems' needs since students in higher education are required to express their voices with writing skill. In order to be successful in accomplishing the task of writing students should be familiar with conventions of their academic community as well as the micro structure and middle level structure of writing (table 2).

Table 2:

Focus of instruction	Participants Mean	(N=30) (S.D.)
1.check for grammar and spelling	3.63	0.85
2.Quotations and citations	2.70	0.83
3. Topic sentence with supporting details	3.36	0.99
4. Process of writing.	2.80	1.09
5.General organization of academic papers in English	2.46	1.04
6.Quick reading of potential sources	2.33	1.00
7. Careful and critical reading of sources	1.90	0.84
8.Awareness of audience	1.96	0.85

1>2, 5,6,7,8; 3>2, 5,6,7,8; 4>2,5,6,7,8; ($p<0.5$)

According to the results of the study, the most problematic areas for students in writing were rhetorical patterns, organization of research paper and format of citation quotation. Rhetorical Patterns are ways of organizing information which includes sub skills of mechanism description, process description, classification, partition, definition, comparison/contrast, ascending/ descending order, situation-problem-solution-evaluation, and cause-effect. Macro structure of writing including rhetorical patterns were not dealt with in our writing classes as a results of this participants reported problem in this aspect of writing. Due to the lack of experience with reading and writing research papers students also encountered problems with organization of research papers such as synthesizing information from reading sources. Another major concern for students was pre-writing skills, grammar and vocabulary; participants reported problems in these areas, although the main focus of classes had been grammar and vocabulary (table 3).

Table 3:

Problems	Participants Mean	(N=30) (S.D.)
1. lack of knowledge about organization of research paper	3.73	0.90
2.Grammar & vocabulary	2.73	0.94
3. Rhetorical patterns	3.90	0.95
4. pre-writing skills	2.23	0.93
5. format of citation quotation	3.40	0.77

3>2, 4, 5; 1>2, 4, 5 $p<0.5$)

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the kind of writing that Iranian EFL students receive at university. Findings indicate that most of the classes are oriented to traditional approaches to L2 writing which are concerned with micro structures of writing and students are given a kind of form focused instruction. Teachers do not consider the macro structure of writing in their instruction. It is also revealed that teachers assume the main position in the teaching process and follow the conventional banking approach to instruction in which students are given the kind of instruction which teacher considers to be her/his need and objective in the course of instruction. As Leki (1995: 11) notes, research has tended to focus on teaching “rather than on L2 students and their academic literacy experiences”, which has led to a neglect of students’ voices (Leki, 2001). Language teachers should be supportive and open towards students’ ideas, plans and concerns through individual meetings or reflective journals especially when students are at an early stage of the writing process (Asaoka & Usui, 2003).

It is suggested that teachers give special attention to students' academic writing skill and consider the overall patterns of writing. They should help students develop knowledge of how to organize their writing and develop critical reading and writing skills in order to be able to evaluate texts in terms of relevancy and appropriateness.

References

1. Asaoka, Ch. & Usui, Y. (2003). Students' Perceived Problems in an APA Writing Course. *JALT Journal*, 25 (2), pp.143-172.
2. Baleghizadeh, S. & Gordani, Y.(2012). Academic writing and grammatical accuracy: the role of corrective feedback. *Gist Education and Learning Research Journal*, 6.
3. Buckingham, L. (2008). Development of English academic writing competence by Turkish scholars. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 3.
4. Castello, M., Banales, G. & Vega, N. (2010). Research approaches to the Regulation of academic writing: the state of the question. *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology*, 8 (3).
5. Coffin, C., Curry, M., Goodman, S., Hewings, A., Lillis, T. & Swann, J. (2003). *Teaching academic writing: A toolkit for higher education*. Published by Routledge.
6. Fujioka, M. (2001) Asian students' English writing experience. 27th Annual JALT Conference.
7. Hinkel, E. (2002). *Second Language Writers' Text: Linguistic and Rhetorical Features*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
8. Hirose, K. (1998). The effects of English paragraph writing instruction on Japanese university students. *JACET Bulletin*, 29 (51-64).
9. Kroll, B. (2003). *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing*. Cambridge University Press.
10. Leki, I. & Carson, J.G. (1997). "Completely Different Worlds". EAP and the Writing Experiences of ESL students in University Courses. *Tesol Quarterly*, 31(1), pp. 39-70.
11. Newfields. T. (2003). Helping EFL students acquire academic writing skills. *Journal of Nanzan Junior College*, 30, pp. 99–120
12. Petri, B. (2007). “This English Writing Thing”: Students’ Perceptions of Their Writing Experiences at an English-medium University. *Porta Linguarum*, 7, pp. 45-55.
13. Schmitt, N. (2002). *An introduction to applied linguistics*. Published by Arnold.
14. Zamel, V. (1976) 'Teaching Composition in the ESL Classroom: What We Can Learn from Research in the Teaching of English'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 10 (1), pp.67–76.

Appendix

Samples of Interview

Question 1:

Would you please explain more about your writing course at university?

Answer 1:

" Well, in our writing classes our teachers wrote samples of student's' writing on the board and started discussing the writing in terms of topic sentences, supporting sentences and analyzed the grammatical issues of writing. Our instructor chose a topic for next session and asked us to write an essay about it, we were supposed to hand in the written product to him. Our writings were evaluated by teacher and were given feedback on the problematic issues. The feedbacks were mostly related to grammar, vocabulary and punctuation".

Answer 2:

"In our writing classes we covered some pages of text books about writing and were supposed to write on a topic which was chosen by our instructor. The instructor corrected our writings and gave feedback to us on the appropriateness of grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation".

Question 2:

Did you work in groups in your writing classes or exchange ideas with your peers in the process of writing?

Answer 1:

"No, for the most part our teacher did every thing in the class, he explained about the appropriate ways of writing an essay in English, and asked us to write about a topic for the coming session and every body did her/his work individually".

Answer 2:

"We usually worked individually; we were given a topic and were asked to write about, very seldom we worked with our classmates".

Question 3:

What are the most problematic areas for you in academic writing task?

Answer 1:

"For me the most difficult thing is establishing coherency in my work, I really do not know how to organize my work; I do not know how to start the topic and how to make connection between ideas".

Answer2"

"I can not organize my ideas, I usually have a lot of innovative ideas about the topic in my mind; but I do not know how to connect them and produce a text which appears standard and appropriate in English".